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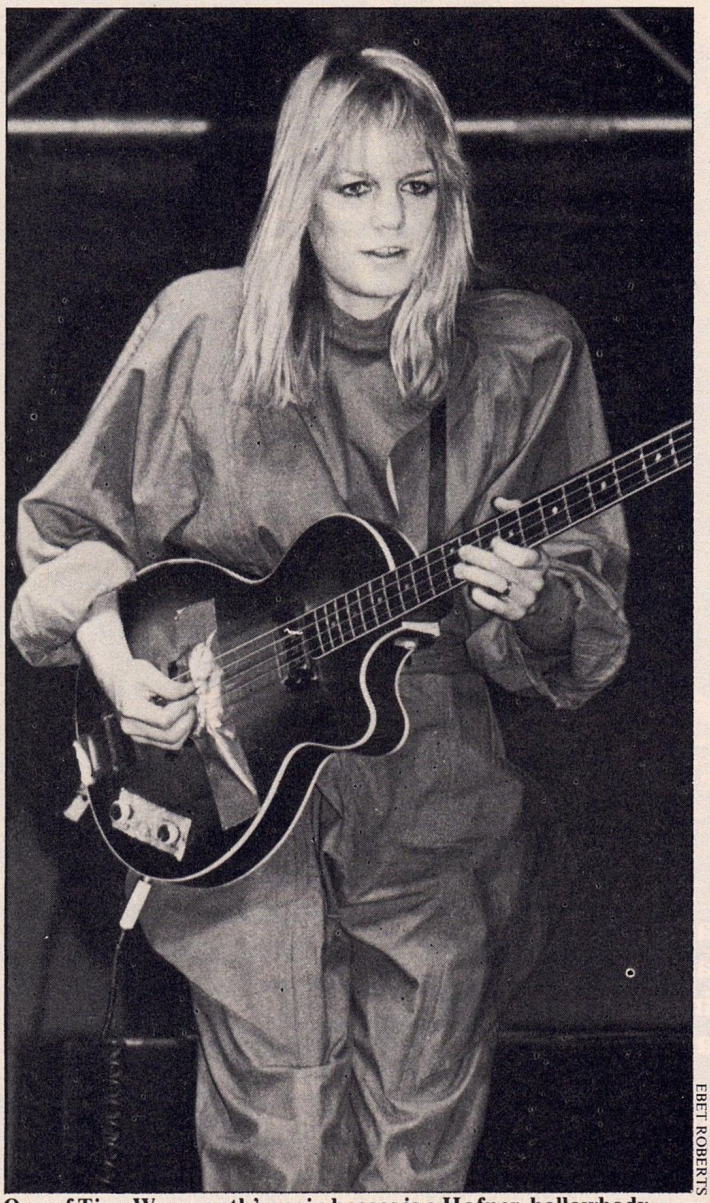
TALKING HEADS

By Robin Tolleson

EBET ROBERTS

David Byrne and his Roland GR-300 Guitar Synthesizer.



EBET ROBERTS

One of Tina Weymouth's main basses is a Hofner hollowbody.

David Byrne

"Inventive, Unorthodox & Underrated"

--Adrian Belew

"DAVID BYRNE'S LEAD work is an undefinable beast," says former Talking Heads co-guitarist Adrian Belew. "He is a highly underrated, inventive player, especially with his rhythm work. I like the way he wrestles with new things with a childlike enthusiasm. Lots of times he looked to me like a big wide-eyed kid—sort of, 'Oh, wow, look at this. Look what we can do here. Oh, this is great!' I think of David as being very spontaneous. I don't think he has a singular approach to anything."

Indeed, David Byrne almost belongs in his own category. He manages to pretty well hide any of the usual rock influences such as Eric Clapton, and he doesn't tip his hand to much blues knowledge. He's not really a lead guitarist, although some of his solos are devastating. And he's not a rhythm guitarist—at least not in the conventional sense. Perhaps his instrumental role in Talking Heads could best be described as that of a texturalist. "I don't play too many melodies on guitar," he explains. "Even the lead parts I do tend to be textures and effects rather than a melody that's worked out. They tend to be a series of weird effects that builds up the way a melody does, but they don't use melodic structure. They use texture and funny sounds. I developed that style out of necessity, out of not being a real good melodic player. It's as good a way to do it as any."

Offstage, David Byrne is shy and introverted. Almost trance-like in conversation, he pauses for long moments before answering some questions, while tossing others aside with a blast of nervous energy. But once he walks onstage in baggy trousers and slicked-back hair, he's a changed man, confident in his persona. He bangs the daylights out of his Martin D-35 on the Talking Heads' cult classic "Psycho Killer." Then he sheds the steel-string acoustic for a Fender Stratocaster as the band forms around him, and lays into some funky, James Brown-type rhythmic scratching. Soloing during "Making Flippy Floppy," he launches into a continually rumbling, wavering slur of notes that has a distinct Eastern flavor. And under his bright-eyed vocals lurk some ferocious, hard-as-stone guitar snippets.

As Talking Heads' music has evolved over the years, acquiring a more lush sound with the added personnel, Byrne's guitar playing has maintained a cold edge. "Our sound begins with David's voice," commented drummer Chris Frantz in 1977. While the band has a lot more sound to choose from with its current ten-member lineup, that voice is no less commanding. Byrne shouts like an evangelist, stutters, mumbles, and shrieks—all the while maintaining a distinctive musicality. "Seen And Not Seen" from *Remain In Light*, for instance, features a panorama of guitar sounds, synthesizer, and vocal interplay. The vocal regeneration effects on other parts of the album are disarming, almost frightening. David uses vocal effects in unison with manic guitar playing on "Artists Only" from *More Songs About Buildings & Food*. Talking Heads' latest LP, *Speaking In Tongues*, contains plenty of vocal gibberish. In jazz, this style might be called

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Tina Weymouth

Fresh Designs On Funk Bass

SOMEHOW IT ALMOST SEEMS TOO simple. The Talking Heads scoured New York's underground in 1975 looking for a bassist, without luck. So Tina Weymouth, the group's closest friend, who had never played bass before, decided to learn the instrument and join the band. In nine years' time, Martina Michelle Weymouth, has infused fresh and imaginative bass lines into the radical, sophisticated new wave style of Talking Heads, and now colors the music of Tom Tom Club as well.

Talking Heads—an enigma, although one of the more delightful ones in popular music. It's undeniable that they are now creating "popular music" after their *Speaking In Tongues* finished as one of 1983's top LPs and the single "Burning Down The House" flamed high on pop and dance charts.

Still, Weymouth sees Talking Heads as a cult band. "I don't see it as a mass success," the 33-year-old bassist recently told *The Rocket*. "I think it's just a very large cult audience. Enough people have seen us live over the past years and that it's built up slowly. I still think we're better live than on record."

The latest Talking Heads records, *Speaking In Tongues* and *Remain In Light*, have a much different sound than early efforts such as *Talking Heads '77* and *More Songs About Buildings & Food*. Today the band includes ten members, layering dense washes of sound and rhythmic pulses—the playing is tight and economical. In the earlier days, the band was known for its piercing, raw, two-guitars/bass/drums sound. Talking Heads were not the most highly trained musicians when they were first getting things rolling. "You don't have to be a virtuoso at all," says drummer Chris Frantz, who is also Tina Weymouth's husband. "You just have to have a good idea. It's nice if it's well performed, but it doesn't have to be. I think that's the best thing new wave has done for recorded music in general. It's nice when somebody—maybe an architect—can get an idea for a song, do an independent record, have it be a smash, and have an enormous influence on people that have been doing music for years."

In *The Name Of This Book Is Talking Heads* [Proteus Pub., dist. by Scribner's], by Krista Reese, Tina Weymouth is referred to as "an itinerant Navy brat." Her mother is French, and Tina has lived in France as well as in various parts of the States. "It makes a big difference in what you know you can do in life if experience has taught you that you can live anywhere," she says.

Weymouth met David Byrne and Chris Frantz at the Rhode Island School Of Design, and began supporting their band, the Artistics. During that time she co-wrote what would later be a Talking Heads song, "Psycho Killer" [*Talking Heads '77*] with Byrne and Frantz. When she and Frantz graduated from the school, Tina suggested that the three of them move to New York. There was some mention of starting a band.

David and Chris were soon spending more time jamming than

David Byrne

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scatting; in some churches it's known as "tongues."

Byrne was born in Dunbarton, Scotland, on May 14, 1952, and grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. He advanced himself on his first guitar—an acoustic—as the result of a bet: "A friend of mine thought that he could learn faster with lessons, and I thought I could learn faster by just getting guitar books, songbooks, and things like that and learning the songs. And I won. I bought a Bob Dylan songbook and a Beatles songbook and learned just about all the tunes from those.

"Some of the first stuff I learned was rock. I'd bang my thumb on the edge of the neck and whatnot, to simulate drums. I eventually worked out something that's kind of a combination between lead and rhythm. Whenever there was any kind of instrumental part, I had to try to simulate playing both parts at once somehow. I still often use the guitar in a percussive way. I think most of the time it has a pretty metallic sound." David's other early influences came to include Jimmy Nolen, guitarist for James Brown & The Famous Flames, and Neil Young. His fascination with ethnic music began in high school, when he'd borrow records from the library.

Byrne has said that at one time he could have gone either into professional art or music. He met Chris Frantz at the Rhode Island School Of Design, where he sporadically attended art classes. The drummer and guitarist organized a band called the Artistics (later the Autistics), which became, at least, a favorite at the campus bar. Early on, Byrne played a Fender Musicmaster, which he replaced with a Stratocaster after it was stolen: "I like the twang bar, but other than that, there's no particular reason why I like the Strat. I just got it because so many people had used them and recommended them as good guitars. So I figured, 'Aw, I guess I'll get one.'"

If he could design a guitar, though, he says, "it would be like Indian instruments, where you can really bend and get up to other notes—that kind of thing. What appeals to me about the guitar is that it's sensitive to nuances of human touch. I think that the synthesizers, keyboards, and all those sort of things are going to have to be developed further along those lines. They might even have to sacrifice the number of sounds that they can make in order to be more touch-sensitive. Keyboards are going to have to be more like the guitar. They were making some that were touch-sensitive, but I'm skeptical that they really have the nuances that are available with a guitar, where you can hit it lightly or heavily and really hear the difference in tone as well as volume. I think synthesizers are going to have to meet guitars halfway."

In 1974 Byrne, Frantz, and their close friend and supporter Tina Weymouth (also an artist at the school; see accompanying story) moved to New York City with the vague idea of putting together a band and exploring the art scene. They wound up taking day jobs. Working for an ad agency, David became quickly disenchanted with the art scene. He spent hours hanging out at the Mudd Club and CBGB in New York, working on music and looking for a bassist.

After months of searching failed to bring a satisfactory bassist, Tina auditioned for the job. She had never played bass before, and Byrne at first balked at the idea of having a novice in such an important role. But she was accepted into the lineup, and this original trio—Byrne, Frantz, and Weymouth—remains the nucleus of the band today. They played their first gig as Talking Heads at CBGB in June 1975, and toured Europe with the Ramones before signing with Sire Records. In 1977 they added guitarist/keyboardist Jerry Harrison in time for their debut album, *Talking Heads '77*. Their single "Psycho Killer" caused many listeners to view them as eccentrics. "The first time I saw David in 1977," remembers Belew, "Talking Heads was an unbelievably raw band. It was unusual to see the way he was wrestling with feedback and things that were a little out of his control. But he was going for 'em."

A SELECTED DAVID BYRNE DISCOGRAPHY

Solo albums: *Catherine Wheel*, Sire, SRK-3645; *Music & Rhythm*, PVC Records, 201; *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*, Sire, SRK-6093. **With Talking Heads:** *Talking Heads '77*, Sire, 6036; *More Songs About Buildings & Food*, Sire, K-6058; *Fear Of Music*, Sire, K-6076; *Remain In Light*, Sire, SRK-6095; *Speaking In Tongues*, Sire, 1-23771; *The Name Of The Band Is Talking Heads*, Sire, 2SR-3590; *Attack Of The Killer B's, Vol. 1*, (with various artists), Warner Bros., 1-23837; *King Of Comedy* (soundtrack with various artists), Warner Bros., 1-23765. **With others:** Robert Fripp, *God Save The Queen/Under Heavy Manners*, Polydor, 6288.

Their second album, *More Songs About Buildings & Food*, yielded their first Top 40 hit, "Take Me To The River." This release also marked the beginning of Talking Heads' four-year relationship with experimentalist producer Brian Eno. Eno would help the group learn to use the studio much more effectively, and steer their drive toward a more densely layered sound. He also spearheaded their forays into African music, about which Byrne comments, "This is more an overall point-of-view influence rather than an overt musical influence on my playing. Africans put a different emphasis on the music, what it's about and the way it affects people. I think a lot of African music—and music with roots in African music—is about losing one's self in a community. And a lot of white music—and music that has its roots in European traditions—is about emphasizing the individual and the individual's unique personality. Those are exaggerations, but if you have to generalize, those are the two extremes."

Eno and Byrne became friends and recorded *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts* together as well. The album combined rhythm tracks with a collage of voices, such as the song of a Lebanese mountain singer. On the album, Byrne employed one of his favorite effects: "It's a very long reverb. I think it makes almost anything sound melodic. I also used it on *Catherine Wheel* for 'Cloud Chamber,' and the one called 'Light Bath.' 'Light Bath' is just these little pings, like 'bink, bonk,' with these real long echoes so they sound like flutes."

Although few critics noted it, Talking Heads' earliest records—before their shift towards funk music several years ago—were R&B oriented. Belew recalls, "Early on, I was very aware that David was influenced by James Brown's music. In fact, one of the funniest things about Talking Heads that they mentioned to me was that they were trying to sound like James Brown and people like that, but because they didn't do it very well, they ended up sounding radically different."

"People just didn't notice it before," adds Byrne. "It's funny—they noticed it in Europe, where they thought our stuff was really influenced by Booker T. & The MGs, and stuff like that. Nobody seemed to pick up on that here, which is fine. People see different things in it. But it's funny that one country saw it one way, and another part of the world saw it in such a different way."

Fresh from stints with Frank Zappa and David Bowie, Adrian Belew made his first appearance with Talking Heads on their fourth album, *Remain In Light*. Produced by Eno, this signalled the band's shift toward more layered, African-influenced music. Belew joined the band for a 12-week tour of the U.S., Europe, and Japan. "When we worked together in 1980 and '81," he recalls, "I saw that David was really good at sound processing. He worked a lot with Roland Space Echoes and things like that to create even more rhythmic effects. He'd make the guitar start regenerating through the Space Echo, and it would just take off. It would build up and start going, 'chik, chik, chik,' and feed back. That's a real nice thing, like a lot of the things that you hear—the little spooky effects and spatial sounds that come in and out of records, particularly *Fear Of Music*."

In 1981 Byrne was asked by modern dance choreographer Twyla Tharp to do the ballet score for *Catherine Wheel*. Byrne collaborated with Eno, Belew, and others on the effort, earning raves from the critics. John Rockwell reported in *The New York Times*, "Mr. Byrne is in the forefront of young American composers who are proving that rock is hardly the antithesis of serious music, but instead one of the most promising

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David Byrne

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idioms in which serious composers can work today."

Says Belew, "I really enjoyed working with David on *Catherine Wheel* because we did very unorthodox things. For instance, all of my equipment was lost in shipment from London, so I was down to nothing. I didn't have any of my normal effects, toys, and things that I relied on, which turned out well. David and I ended up doing lots of things that were kind of on-the-spot inventiveness. You know, using Prime Times [digital delays] or Tropicana orange juice bottles—pretty much anything we could think of to make sound. When I think of David, I think of a rhythmic guitarist who is very inventive, and in a primitive sort of way."

During the *Catherine Wheel* project, Byrne had to work closely with the dancers. In cases where routines were already worked out, he wrote music to fit the steps. Other times, he'd compose music that was later choreographed. In an interview in the June '82 *Rockbill*, he described one particularly inventive session from the project: "'Cloud Chamber' was just a bunch of people banging pots and pans, and then I added some guitar and electronic sounds. The sound reminded me of the protons or electrons leaving their trails through this fog. The sound of metal that left long echoes . . . footprints."

Talking Heads released *The Name Of This Band Is Talking Heads* in 1982. The music for the first of the album's two disks was culled from live shows recorded in 1977 and 1979 with the original lineup of Byrne, Harrison, Weymouth, and Frantz. The second disk, cut between 1980 and '81, features an expanded lineup with, among others, Adrian Belew, bassist Busta Jones, and backup singers Nona Hendryx and Dolette McDonald.

When Belew departed the band shortly afterwards to pursue other projects, Talking Heads opted to follow new musical paths. "Instead of looking for someone who was an imitation Adrian Belew, we found Alex Weir, who is a great rhythm guitarist," reports Byrne. "We thought this might take our music in a different direction as well. Somebody at Warner Brothers who was close to Quincy Jones recommended Alex, who worked with the Brothers Johnson."

Talking Heads' most recent album, *Speaking In Tongues*, brought them another hit single (and a hit video) with "Burning Down The House." "When we were working on that song at first," David remembers, "it just had the electric guitar and electronic things. And it wasn't until I just on the spur of the moment added the acoustic guitar—it's kind of a gallop—that it really took on a whole different light. And everybody was real excited about that."

How do current Talking Heads guitarists Byrne, Weir, and Harrison figure out who's going to play which part? "Sometimes we work together on something," David explains. "One person will play this and another person will play that, and it will lock in. Other things are done one at a time. Sometimes Alex came into the studio and a lot of things had already been recorded. He had no choice but to try and fit his parts around that. There might not have been very much recorded at the time, but it was enough that there was a limit to how drastic he could be.

"Although Talking Heads didn't really start out recording this way, we now go in the studio and do rhythm tracks even before we know what the lyrics are going to be. It's a way of doing in the studio what happens anyway inside your head when you're writing a song. It comes out of the mind and becomes an external process that everybody can get involved in, instead of one person doing it all in his head. The music inspires the lyrics, and the words just serve the music. I work pretty hard on them, but they still have to serve the overall sound. Writing words can be the loneliest aspect of the songwriting process when you do it by yourself. It's the least fun. The lyrics have to have a certain amount of ambiguity, but then they have to be specific enough that they mean something and make some kind of impression."

Occasionally, Talking Heads will remix tunes from albums to fit a 12″ dance record format. "Slippery People," from *Speaking In Tongues*, is one example. "That was pretty easy," says Byrne. "There were tracks on the 24-track tape that never made it to the album version—riffs and things like that. So we just brought up other little sections, like eight bars that feature stuff that had been left out. On the dance mixes, you can pretty much go as long as you like, as long as there's something interesting every 20 seconds or so. People have a short attention span. I guess albums are supposed to serve a different function. People listen to them at home, whereas a lot of dance mixes are intended for clubs. People don't always want to listen to them at home."

Byrne has recently spent time in Japan, where he worked with theater director Robert Wilson and recorded Kabuki percussionists in Tokyo. He now produces records for other artists, including a B-52's EP called *Mesopotamia,* and an album by Fun Boy Three, *Waiting*. His involvement with Talking Heads extends from being guitarist, lyricist, and songwriter to designing album covers and writing press kits. He is also helping to produce their upcoming film, *Electric Guitar*.

So far, Byrne says, his goals with Talking Heads keep changing. Thankfully, he's not satisfied with the success the band has had, adding, "If I was, I'd stop." ◧

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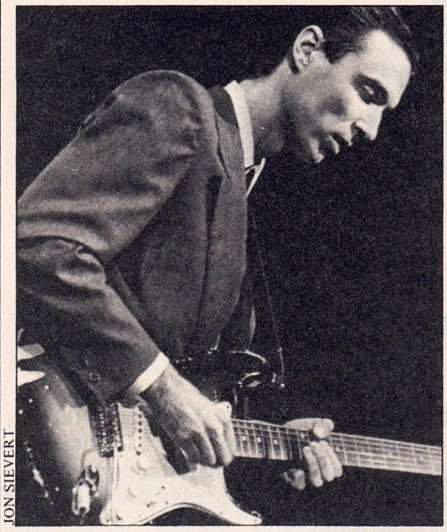
Talking Heads Equipment Check

By Robin Tolleson



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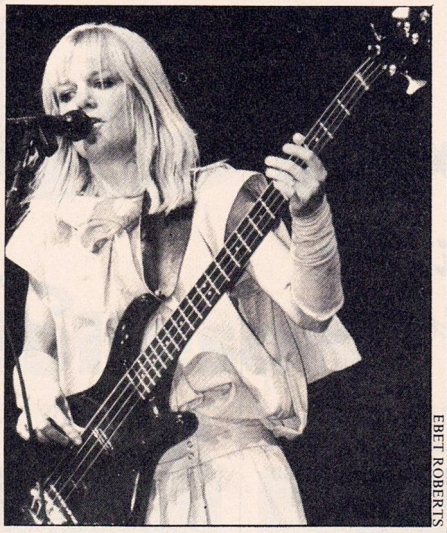

EBET ROBERTS

DAVID BYRNE TRAVELS with a total of four guitars: two sunburst Stratocasters, a Roland GR-300 Guitar Synthesizer, and a Martin D-35 acoustic. Talking Heads guitar technician Jeff Shaw says, "I'm not quite sure if the Strats are '62s or '63s, but he has two of them exactly alike. They look very similar — beat up the same with the same kind of wear marks. Both have rosewood fingerboards. The twang bar on his main Strat is just incredible; it's broken in just perfectly. I never have to do anything to the guitar: Put the strings right on and it stays in tune. And it has all original parts! That's what's special about it. A lead guitarist would love to get a hold of that guitar. But, you know, he likes it because the tension on the twang bar is set up very comfortably."

In Byrne's Roland pedalboard are an MXR Dynacomp and Distortion +, which are almost always used together, plus a Boss Flanger and Boss Delay. "A lot of the regeneration effects that David gets are a combination of the Boss Delay and Flanger," Shaw explains. "It gives a kind of second-generation sound. And that's how David adds a lot of parts. He doesn't try to really play a solid rhythm or anything, but he likes to throw in all those parts. Also, the sound man uses an AMS reverb and a Roland 501 Chorus Echo, and puts effects on top of what David is doing onstage. David has been getting very good at studio work, creating sounds and putting them together. He's not technical about things, but when he gets a good sound he really knows it."

Byrne plays through a Roland JC 120 amp, which is miked and reinforced through the sound system. Shaw says, "We've been very happy with those; they put out a nice, clean sound. Adrian Belew turned us on to those back in 1980. In 1982 I used six of them on the road for keyboard setups and never blew a speaker, never had an amp problem."

Tina Weymouth has two single-cutaway hollowbody sunburst Hofner basses and a blue Veillette-Citron Standard solidbody bass. The tiny 6-string guitar she uses on "This Must Be The Place (Naive Melody)" [*Speaking In Tongues*] is a rare '66 or '67 Fender Musiclander solidbody—also known as the Swinger. She uses a Gallien-Krueger 400B head with bass cabinets custom-made by NYTD Pro Audio in New Jersey. The cabinets are modeled after a front-loaded model with two 15s that she bought several years ago in New York. "The cabinet is not exactly as deep as what JBL would specify," says Shaw, "but it puts out a sound that gives that uniqueness she likes." Weymouth also has a Roland pedalboard with an Ibanez Auto Filter, and she uses a Boss Micro Mixer so she can get even levels between her bass and the Moog Rogue monophonic synthesizer she uses on a couple songs.

According to Shaw, Byrne and Weymouth have been using the same rather unusual picks for several years now. "They're green, triangular nylon ones that Herco used to make. David and Tina didn't ever want to lose them, so they've been taking care of their own picks for the last three years. I've never had to hand them a pick. I believe David lost the last of his, and Tina has only one left. So David's been substituting a regular plastic triangular one, which he gets by on. Along with her green Herco, Tina also uses Modulus Graphite picks, which she gets in California. She uses those on a couple of songs. She also uses her fingers on some songs." ■

Tina Weymouth

painting. They searched for a bassist, hanging around CBGB and the Mudd Club at night, talking to musicians. When their efforts failed, it became logical, at least to Tina, that she should pick up the bass. That suggestion did not meet with great approval from the one would would have to do the teaching, David Byrne. He did finally agree, however, the friction in the band over the bass chair has been well-documented. After the group landed a recording contract in 1977, Byrne made Weymouth audition for the band again. Although bassist Busta "Cherry" Jones joined the group to tour in 1980 and '81, Weymouth has been the sole bassist for the last two tours, and does not deny she's happy about that.

Watching Weymouth perform, it's easy to see how much more confidence she has in her playing now than she had when Talking Heads first started playing CBGB. The band's stage is now like a street scene, full of motion. When they began in 1975, their rigid poses were seen as a statement against the pretentious rock world. "We would wear white shirts and black trousers, and David and Tina would stand there like little statues," says Frantz, "while other bands are wearing these fancy glitter costumes and jumping around, and the guitar player naturally was acting like he was having an orgasm while doing his solos. All that had just gotten to be a drag for us." Tina no longer stands fixed, eyes glued to Byrne's guitar. She rocks back and forth in a steady rhythm, and her bass lines land with precision.

Further extending her confidence is the success of Tom Tom Club, originally conceived by Tina and Chris as a project to explore some musical turf outside Talking Heads. However, Tom Tom Club quickly grew into a full-fledged band in its own right. Songs such as "Genius Of Love," "Wordy Rappinghood," and "The Man With The Four-Way Hips" [the former two are from *Tom Tom Club* and the latter is from *Close To The Bone*] have been played heavily at dance clubs and on radio stations across the country since the group's debut album in 1981.

There's quite a difference between the intellectual, radical intensity of Talking Heads and the lighthearted island sound of Tom Tom Club. In the Weymouth, Frantz rhythm section you can hear influences such as James Brown, Booker T. And The MGs, KC And The Sunshine Band, and Mano Dibango. Since Tina and Chris moved to the Bahamas several years ago, some Caribbean flavor has infiltrated Tom Tom Club as well—reggae, calypso, junkanoo, soca, and sponge. Tom Tom Club numbers a dozen members, including Tina's sisters Lani and Laura, and Chris' brother Roddy. "We try to keep a festive, familial, and relaxed feeling," says Frantz. "It's really a collaboration amongst every member." Weymouth adds, "We like the attitudes toward music in the Bahamas, especially for the Tom Tom Club."

(continued)